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Identifying Historic Photographs: Clues for Genealogy Researchers

by Irene Zenev

Until the invention and dissemination of photography in the mid-19th century, only a small portion of the population in Europe and America could afford to have portraits made. Before 1850, having one's likeness transferred to a two-dimensional work of art meant commissioning an artist to draw or paint it. Only the wealthy could afford this luxury.

Then came the photograph, and the world changed forever. Photography brought instant and affordable portraiture to the masses, and the popularity of the medium soared. By the 1850s and '60s, photographers had set up elaborate studios outfitted like salons in expensive homes. In the American West, itinerant photographers traveled the countryside, setting up tents, putting out signs, and making images of people of all ranks and classes for posterity.

Family photographs are often a godsend for genealogists. But sometimes, finding a photograph of an unidentified ancestor can be a "good news-bad news" situation. Problems usually begin when a researcher is handed a box of family photographs from Aunt Emily's estate that are undated, unidentified, and come with no supporting material to give clues about who these people are or what their family affiliation might be. Fortunately, there are a few ways to narrow down the possibilities. If you're already heavy into your family history, then the research you've done will help tremendously. Then, you just have to know how to search for clues in the photographs themselves in order to date them and corroborate your information.

There are three different ways that a researcher can attack the problem of photo identification. The first way is to identify the photo process itself. Like any new technology, photographic processes have constantly improved. Fortunately, information about the history of photography and the changes in photo processes is readily available.

The second way to help identify a photograph is to look for a photographer's

mark. Many 19th century studio photographers imprinted their name or studio name right on the photo mount. Through research, one can find the dates that the photographer worked in a specific location. Local historical societies and museums are good resources for information on 19th century photographers.

And the last, and somewhat trickier, way to help identify a photo is to examine the clothing of the sitter. Styles of clothing and the inclusion of personal items in a portrait may help identify the time period as well as the portrait's subject.

Researchers should always be cautious about identifying a historic photograph. There are several things that can throw you off track. The first consideration is that modern tourist photography sometimes imitates 19th century processes. Some of these "old-timey" portraits that you can have made at county fairs and carnivals can be confused with the real thing. These photographers offer period costumes and accessories for customers to wear, and even reproduce historic types of photos—tintypes or daguerreotypes, for example—with great accuracy. If you're not sure about the authenticity of your photograph, take it to an appraiser or to your local historical society or museum for identification. (Remember to call ahead to make an appointment at your local historical society or museum.)

The final caution in identifying a photograph through the clothing styles is to remember that 19th century photographers also lent clothing to their subjects. Don't assume that great-great Uncle Theophilous was wealthy because he was sporting a beautiful suit in his portrait. Etiquette developed in the 1800s about proper dress for having one's photograph taken, and ladies and gentlemen were advised in magazines and other publications about the most appropriate wardrobe for the sitting. Since many people could afford the price of the photograph but could



not purchase new clothing, studio photographers had a collection of “appropriate” garments for sitters to wear.

For an authentic historic photograph, dating through clothing styles (even though the clothes might not belong to the sitter) can be helpful. Fortunately, people abided by much more convention in dress in the 19th century than in the 20th or 21st centuries. Generally, women always wore dresses, men wore suits, and babies wore dresses until they reached a certain age, and then they were dressed like small adults. What changed over the years was fairly subtle: the silhouette or shape of the outfits changed, the fabrics changed, and the accessories and hairstyles changed. The only confusion arises when the sitter was wearing out-of-date clothing. Sometimes elderly people who sat for photographs wore clothes from a previous decade.

Overview of Photo Processes and Clothing Styles

1840s

Photography was invented in Europe in the late 1830s, and developed in England and France. Henry Fox developed the collotype in England, but never sold the

rights to the process in the United States. The daguerreotype, named for its French inventor, came to the U.S. through patent rights in 1847, and the popularity of this process spread rapidly.

Clothing styles of the late 1840s are distinctive. Women wore tight-fitting blouses, sometimes called basques, with a full, wide skirt. The sleeves of the blouse or basque were tighter in the earlier part of the decade, but became bell-shaped by the end. Older women wore lace collars or bibs. Sometimes a short cape covered women’s shoulders. Female headwear consisted of bonnets, often straw, tied with a ribbon. Women and girls wore their hair parted in the middle and drew it back into a bun. At the beginning of the decade, loose ringlets were worn over the ears. Toward the end of the decade the ringlets disappear, but the parted hair droops over the ears.

Men wore a fly-front trouser with a light cotton shirt that typically had a small, stand-up collar. A dark-colored necktie, tied horizontally in a bowknot, finished the collar. Coats and shirts had long, narrow sleeves. The hair was worn short to medium length, parted on the side. Facial hair consisted of a fringe beard.

1850s

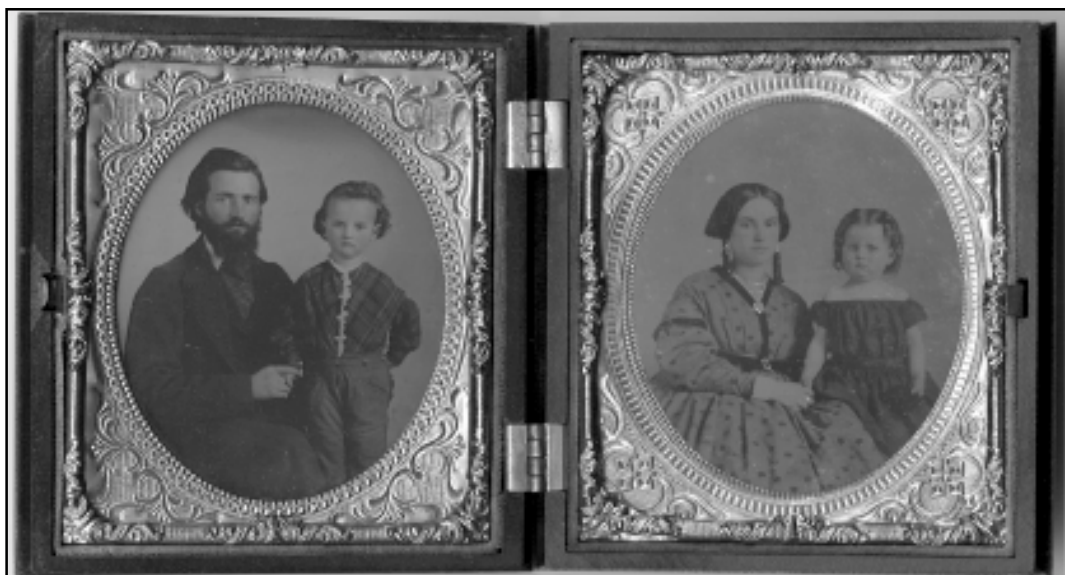
Photo processes flourished in the 1850s. Collodion, or wet-plate processing, was developed. The daguerreotype still prevailed, but by the mid-1850s, the ambrotype gained popularity. Tintypes were a variation on the process. “(N)either the tintype nor the ambrotype dealt the death blow to the daguerreotype. That was left to a third application of the collodion technique, the *carte-de-visite* photograph, patented in France by Disderi in 1854.” (Newhall, 1964.) In this process, a special camera produced multiple negatives. When developed, the prints were pasted on a 4 by 2-1/2 inch mount. Mass production came to photography through the *carte-de-visite*.

Women’s fashions changed slightly from the previous decade. Skirts were



Courtesy of the Horner Collection, Oregon State University, #15270-1 Daguerrotype (1844).





Courtesy of the Horner Collection, Oregon State University, #14939-5,6 Ambrotype (1858).

becoming fuller and fuller. Corsets narrowed the waist, and hoop skirts and crinolines gave fullness to the skirts. The bodice was much more jacket-like. Collars were broad at the beginning of the decade, but gradually became narrower. By the end of the decade the hoop skirt was popular.

Jewelry made from human hair was also prevalent. Sleeves on bodices were fuller, sometimes gathered at the wrist. Women wore decorative combs in their hair.

Men's coats were cut larger, with vests underneath. The shirt collar was turned over the tie, which was still wrapped around the throat. Pants legs got wider. Dress shirts had removable fronts. By the end of the decade, full beards were popular. Hair was longer and pomaded.

1860s

In the United States, taxation for the Civil War gives clues to dating photographs. From 1864-1866, a tax stamp appeared on the back of photographs making them easy to identify. *Carte-de-visite* was still popular, along with ambrotypes and tintypes. By the end of the decade, cabinet cards were introduced.

Clothing styles of the Civil War period took on a military flavor. Women's bodices

often carried a trim, and buttoned down the front like a uniform. A high, narrow, round collar finished the look. The shoulder line dropped, but the sleeve width varied. Full skirts with pleats worn over hoops dominated. Hair was parted in the center and covered the ears.

Men wore longer, larger coats and shirts with bowties or narrow ties. Trousers were also wider, and suspenders common. Hair was parted on the side and facial hair consisted of chin whiskers or a beard. Full beards were fashionable by the end of the decade.



Courtesy of the Horner collection, Oregon State University, #893-4-900 Tintype (1864-1866), (photo on front, civil war stamp on back).





Courtesy of the Horner collection, Oregon State University, #15348-8, 4 Tintype (1870-75).

1870s

Innovations in the photo process continued in this decade. The introduction of the gelatin dry-plate process made the collodion wet-plate process obsolete.

In fashion, the 1870s brought in the era of the bustle skirt. Women's skirts developed a large bustle by 1872. The female silhouette consisted of a high stand collar,

moderate bell or three-quarter-length sleeve and a small, corseted waist. A black velvet ribbon often adorned the neck. Large lockets and jet beads were worn as accessories. Hair was parted in the center and was sometimes worn loose and cascading down the back, or in a large braid with a hair comb. By the end of the decade the bustle diminished in size, sleeves narrowed and ruffles appeared at the neckline. Hair was still center-parted, but frizzed in front.

Men wore narrower jackets, collarless shirts with detachable collars, and wide, striped ties worn in a loose knot. Fur hats and coats were popular with men. Hair was shorter.

1880s

In this era, picture taking came out of the studio and into the American home. Smaller, more convenient cameras made photography accessible to the amateur. Eastman Kodak introduced its first camera in 1888.

The 1880s were also distinctive years, fashion-wise. In women's clothes, the bustle moved up higher on the back of the dress and became more pronounced. An overskirt often revealed a ruffled underskirt. Sleeves of the bodice developed a small puff at the shoulder. Higher collars predominated for both men and women.

By the end of the decade, the bodice was tight, dropping below the waist. Sleeves were tighter as well, and the skirt often had an overskirt. Hair was worn frizzy at the crown. Accessories included muffs. Men's coats and trousers were also shorter and narrower. White shirts were worn with a variety of ties.

1890s

With the refinement of gelatin emulsions, photographic processes became easier to handle. The developing and printing process was separated from film-exposure in the camera, and photography became accessible to the masses. Amateurs all over the world became enthusiastic picture-takers. Taking snapshots was a huge fad.



In the world of fashion, women's clothing took on a very dramatic silhouette. The large, ballooned, "leg-o-mutton" sleeve predominated by the end of the decade. A-line skirts were worn with gathered bodices that had high collars. Small straw boaters or bonnets with bird feathers were popular.

Men wore small, narrow coats that buttoned high. Collars were stiff, coming up high on the neck by the end of the decade. Bowties prevailed. Short hair and moustaches were commonly worn by men of this era.

A Special Note on Wedding Portraiture

White wedding gowns did not become "traditional" until the 1930s. Prior to that era, women's wedding attire changed with the fashion of the time. Around 1900, white dresses were *de rigueur* for graduation or second-day (honeymoon) wear. In wedding portraits, don't look at the clothing, but at the sitters' hands, which will be predominantly featured toward the camera, showing the wedding rings. 🌸

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Courtesy of the Horner Collection, Oregon State University, #893-8-47 Carte-de-visite (1885).



Courtesy of the Horner Collection, Oregon State University, #893-8-57 Carte-de-visite (1880).

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